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Strength coach at UM adds new dimension to football program

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by DAVE GUFFEY
UM Sports Information Director

STRENGTH COACH AT UM ADDS NEW DIMENSION TO FOOTBALL PROGRAM

MISSOULA--

Mike Van Diest (pronounced Van Deast) doesn't exactly have a "kicking sand in your face" type of story for prospective weight lifters -- but he does know about the results of hard work.

Van Diest, a Montana native from Helena, is one of the new football coaches at the University of Montana. He serves as strength coach and defensive line or "TNT" (tackle-noseguard-tackle) coach.

A standout player at Helena High School, Van Diest went to the University of Wyoming on a football scholarship. He became interested in lifting weights his sophomore season at UW.

"I weighed about 185 pounds and played tight end," recalled the muscled Van Diest. "When I started I could bench (press) about 200 pounds. By spring football that same year I weighed 200 pounds, and could bench 310 pounds."

He eventually got up to 210 pounds, and could bench more than 350 pounds. He formed a weightlifting club at Wyoming and continued his training.

After graduating from Wyoming in 1976 he became a graduate assistant for Wyoming's Cowboys. He then became a part-time coach (defensive line) for the next two seasons.

His love of lifting the steel got him together with Jim Williams, who was then the strength coach at the school.

"I sort of became his official assistant, and when he went with the New York Giants I took over," he said. Van Diest became the strength coach of 14 athletic teams at UW in the summer of 1979.

(over)

"Then the Grizzly job came along, and I had to make a decision to coach college football or do what I was doing," he recalled. "My number one interest is in being a football coach. Now I'm touching base in both areas."

Head Grizzly coach Larry Donovan put the 27-year-old bachelor in charge of the off-season training program, and the returning players are excited about it.

"I really like the idea," said defensive lineman Arnie Rigoni, a senior from Chicago. "I know I can use some work, and I know it can do nothing but good for the team."

Van Diest says he sets up conditioning programs in two categories. One is for the linemen and linebackers, called a "bulk program." The other is for "skill" position players, such as quarterbacks, running backs and so on.

"Weightlifting and football go hand-in-hand," noted Van Diest. "The nature of the sport is that strength is important in doing the best job possible against your opponent."

Each player's body size and strength are studied, and then after a couple of weeks of evaluation a program is established for each player.

"There are no pretests given," he said. "I can tell by how big they are, and how strong they are, what they need to work on. In football leg strength and lower back strength are very important."

Van Diest said some programs are wrong for some players, while they work well for others. An example he gave was of an all-conference wide receiver who ran a 4.5 in the 40-yard dash and could bench press 380 pounds. He got so bulky that he reduced his speed and pass-catching ability.

On the other hand, defensive tackle Pat Ogrin, whom Van Diest worked with at Wyoming, improved from 6-5, 215 to 6-5, 255, and almost doubled his strength. "He can still get stronger, and probably will, especially if he wants to play professional football," Van Diest added. (Ogrin is from Butte.)

Van Diest said weightlifting has always been an integral part of football, but that the use of strength programs is changing.

"Now it is touching all sports," he said. "Everyone from swimmers to basketball players are lifting weights with good results."